

Agitation against Kerala Silver Line

In Kerala, the agitation against the Silver Line (K-Rail) project is intensifying. Women and children are coming forward to block the survey conducted by Revenue officials under police protection. In many places, the installation of survey stones has been stopped and the Revenue officials and the police had to withdraw.

The four districts of Kerala have now become the epicenter of the struggle. As part of the survey, tensions remained high in Ernakulam district for a whole day. The survey stones set up there under police protection were uprooted by the people and thrown away. The situation was similar in Kottayam, Kozhikode and Malappuram. Survey stones set up in Kozhikode area were thrown into the river by the people. The agitation against K-Rail is intensifying in Kerala. The BJP is playing double game in the fight against silver line.

It was BJP finance minister Nirmala Sitharaman who directed the government to finalize talks with Japan's financial agency JICA to raise funds for the Silver Line project and move ahead with land acquisition. This is clear from the letter sent by Nirmala Sitharaman to Chief Minister Pinarayi Vijayan on January 5th, 2021. It is on the basis of the agreement with Narendra Modi's government that Pinarayi Vijayan overcame the opposition of the people and forcibly laid stones on their land. It is with Modi's assurance and strength that Pinarayi's police are committing atrocities against the people.

The hypocrisy of the BJP in the struggle against the Silver Line needs to be recognized. That is what the BJP is doing in Kerala with the protesters on the one hand and the Pinarayi government, which is implementing the project through the central government on the other. These instances prove that the Pinarayi government is pursuing the same imperialist dependent development policy of the Narendra Modi government.

In addition, 49 per cent of the shares of K-Rail Limited for implementing K Rail are owned by the Central Government-Railways. If the Railways and the Central Government do not go ahead with this project, it will have an economic, environmental and social impact and non-profitable, the installation of this survey stone shall cease. Why is the BJP not trying to do that?

Intensive efforts are being made to obtain a loan from JICA. International agencies will only grant loans once the hurdles, including land acquisition, are met. The government wants to show that 80% of the acquisition for the loan is complete. Part of this is the government's cover-up.

The logic of building an isolated rail network using substandard technology is difficult to explain. In addition, there are clear discrepancies between the number of passengers per day and the rate of financial return in the preliminary and final feasibility studies. Critical figures were not taken seriously when the project was planned. That's why the detailed project report should be kept confidential.

Kerala is not lagging behind in infrastructure. The widest part of Kerala is less than 150 km. The length from north to the southern part of the state is less than 600 km. The longest south-north section has a railway line and a national highway (NH). To the east and west are the NH, interstate highways and state highways. Lots of narrow roads, level and steep. There are 4 airports in the state. There are also relatively better waterways. Kerala is far ahead in road density. No other state has such a well-developed transportation network.

The current 'Silver Line' semi high speed rail project under the auspices of the Kerala Rail Development Corporation (K-Rail), which claims to be able to reach the southern tip of Kerala in just four hours instead of its current speed, is different from other projects.

On the one hand, the huge economic and environmental losses are part of the plan, on the other it was not carefully planned. Given the current state of the economy, the current and future potential needs, the fundamental question of why rapid travel within the state is needed has not been addressed. There is no clear effort on the part of the government to consider other low-cost alternatives, even if they are slightly slower than the semi-high-speed rail and even if it is longer. The second difference is that the devastating effects of this rail project are not limited to any one area. The project is one where technical, economic, social and environmental disasters come together. K-Rail is a project implemented by the government of an economically weaker state by borrowing from international institutions. The financial burden of this will ultimately fall on the ordinary people who will benefit the least from the project.